

M O N A S T E R Y

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VISOKI DEČANI



HISTORY TREASURY
FRESCOES
ARCHITECTURE
MONASTIC LIFE



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VISOKI DEČANI MONASTERY

edited by the monks of Dečani



With the blessing of
His Grace Bishop Teodosije
of Raška-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija
Serbian Orthodox Church



Dečani 2014





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Ко је кадар да исприча о
моћи **Б**ожјој?... **Њ**ега
заволеше наши оцеви
и у **Њ**ега се уздаше,
уздаше и спасли су се, јер
одбацивши бригу о свему
земаљском и прихватавши
се духовног разума и страха
Божјег, заменише земаљско
царство небеским животом
и бескрајном славом,
оставивши нам на земљи
успомене достојне хвале ❖

† **С**Ѣ **У**РШ **Т**РѢ **П**ММ
БЖЈ **К**Ѣ **О**И **С**БСН
и **П**МРК **З**МѢ **†**

Who is able to speak of the might of God?...He came to be loved by our fathers who placed their faith in Him, placed their faith in Him and were saved, rejecting the concern of all earthly things and accepting spiritual reason and the fear of God, they exchanged the earthly kingdom for heavenly life and glory eternal, leaving for us on earth memorials worthy of praise...

Stefan Uroš the Third, by the Grace of God the King of All Serbian Lands and the Littoral
(An extract from the Founding Charter of Visoki Dečani Monastery, 14th century)





HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY

Holy King Stefan founded the Dečani Monastery of Christ the Savior, the most glorious endowment of the rich spiritual and building heritage of the Nemanjić dynasty, next to the Bistrica River under the steep cliffs of the Prokletije Mountains *in a place picturesque and full of forests, drenched with waters*. An important part of the historical memory and spiritual identity of the Serbian people lies deeply imbedded and forever preserved in its marble walls, magnificent frescoes and sculptures. We know about the life of the Holy King and the Monastery estate as well as the construction and organization of Dečani Monastery from numerous medieval written records. There are also many documents and records in Serbian, Turkish and other languages that tell us about the later history of the Monastery, which was almost continuously attacked and looted, then restored and given gifts, remaining a living witness of the bloody history of the Balkans despite numerous difficult trials.



The founder of the Monastery was St. Stefan Uroš III of Dečani (1285-1331), the son of Holy King Milutin and the father of Emperor Dušan. The Church celebrates him as a great-martyr on November 11/24 (according to the Julian and Gregorian calendars, respectively). As a ten year-old boy he was given as a hostage to the Tatar Nogai Khan. As a youth he was falsely accused of an attempt to overthrow his father from the throne, blinded and imprisoned in the Monastery of Christ the Pantocrator in Constantinople. Pious, mild-natured

and compassionate, he won the favor of monks and lords alike, and even of Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II himself. Seven years later, after the mediation of Serbian and Greek bishops, his father reconciled with him and gave him the region of Budimlje (in today's Montenegro) to rule. In 1321, after the death of King Milutin, Stefan was crowned in Prizren as Uroš III. Before his coronation he removed the bandages from his eyes and revealed to everyone his miraculous healing through the intercession of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker.



▲ Holy King Stefan of Dečani, a detail from the genealogical tree of the Nemanjić Dynasty.



St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker was given a very prominent place in the frescoes of the Dečani church as Stefan's healer and the patron saint. One of the chapels in the Dečani church was dedicated to this saint. Grigorije Camblak, abbot of Dečani (1402-1409) and later the Bishop of Kiev, adds that the same King built a church dedicated to St. Nicholas not far from the Monastery. ▼



▲ Details of the narrative icon: The exile in Constantinople, restoration of St. Stefan's sight and the reconciliation with his father (painter Longin, 16th century)





▲ Coronation of St. Stefan of Dečani.



▲ St. Stefan distributes alms to the poor.

Stefan Uroš III inherited a large state from his father that was rich in silver and gold mines, and had developed agriculture, livestock farming and commerce. He ruled it wisely and in a God-pleasing manner with love toward both his people and God. The

Holy King concerned himself with philanthropic works and the building and decorating of churches located in his fatherland and outside it: in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Alexandria, Sinai, Thessaly, Constantinople, and especially on the Holy Mountain of Athos for the famous Monastery of Chilandar. The pinnacle of Stefan's endowment efforts was the construction of Dečani Monastery, whose name he would later carry (St. Stefan Dečanski).



▲ The King sent an overlaid icon with the image of St. Nicholas to the famous shrine dedicated to this saint in Bari (Italy), showing the King and his son, the young King Dušan in prayer.

The Battle of Velbužd. ▼





Abbot Arsenije consulting with Holy King Stefan on the construction of the Monastery. ▼



◀The Life of St. Stefan of Dečani by Abbot Grigorije Camblak (c. 1430-1440).

Full of gratitude to God for all the blessings He had given him, especially after the great victory against the Bulgarians in 1330 at Velbužd, King Stefan Uroš III issued his First Founding Charter of Dečani Monastery the same year with the approval of the Church council and the blessing of the Serbian Archbishop, describing the Monastery's land estates and privileges. ▼





Whilst visiting many and diverse places in my region, I found a place in the area of Hvostno called Dečani . . . adorned with every type of tree, for it is a place lush and fertile, and also flat and grassy, and the sweetest waters flow there from every direction; and abundant natural springs surface there and it is watered by a crystal clear river . . . it is enclosed from the west by the highest of mountains and their steep slopes, and hence the air there is wholesome. A large field

adjoins to the east, which is irrigated by the same river. Such a place is, therefore, good and apt for the construction of a monastery.

This is how Grigorije Camblak described choosing of the site for the construction of the royal endowment beneath the Prokletije Mountains, between Peć, the seat of the old Serbian Archdiocese, and Prizren, one of the famous capitals of the Nemanjić dynasty. The monastery estate was





enormous, consisting of continuous territory extending from the Beli Drim River in the Prizren Valley in Metohija to Komovi on the present

Montenegrin border, and from Peć to the Valbona River in Albania with separate holdings in Polimlje, Drenica, near Prizren and the Bojana River.



The Monastery was built on the right bank of the Dečanska Bistrica River in the parish of Zatrnava in a place chosen by St. Sava himself for construction of a monastery on the edge of the fertile Metohija plateau covered with woods of domestic chestnuts and high fir trees. The flatlands on the southwest side of the Monastery transform into a gorge that rises to the gray peaks of the Prokletije Mountains, the natural border separating Old Serbia from Albania. A view from the Monastery of the Dečanska Bistrica River and the mineral water spring. ▼





After choosing the place where the Monastery was to be built, Stefan Uroš ordered that the area be encircled by a rampart fortified by towers, adjacent to which were the monks' quarters and other monastery buildings. The

experienced builder Đorđe and his brothers Dobroslav and Nikola were charged with this, while master builder Fra Vita and the stone-cutters of Kotor built the church of the Pantocrator and decorated it with bas-reliefs.



▲ The inscription in medieval Serbian preserved over the south portal of the church of Visoki Dečani speaks about the building of this Monastery. The master builder, Fra Vita from the royal city of Kotor, according to the inscription, worked on construction of the church for eight years and completed it in 1335.

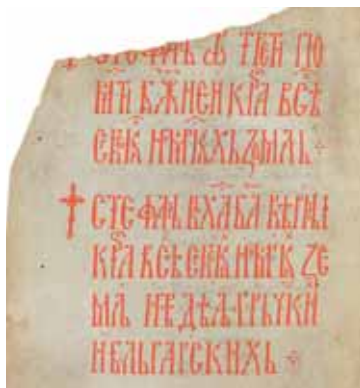


▲ The founder's inscription on the painting of the church in naos, above the western entrance 1347/8.

Witnesses to the construction of Dečani Monastery wrote with enthusiasm about the skill of the craftsmen who cut the different types of marble, raising the walls of the church in such a manner that it was *wondrous and glorious to behold*. Fra Vita dressed the much-praised work in Western style Romano-Gothic attire. However, as in earlier churches of the so-called Ras style, the interior space of the building was completely adapted to the needs of Orthodox liturgical practice, and this is where we can most easily discern the participation of the Holy Archbishop Danilo II, the King's chief advisor and associate in this undertaking.

The beauty of the church interior complemented its grand external appearance: everything was made of hewn stone, gold and other precious materials. It was richly provided with ecclesiastical liturgical artifacts, gold and silver vessels, precious vestments, ornamented pearls,

precious stones and silk textiles. The founder himself wrote in his Charter: *I began to build a house of the Lord God my All-Maintainer (Pantocrator), and upon completing it, I decorated it with every beautiful thing inside and without.*



▲ Signatures of King Stefan Uroš III and King Stefan Dušan on the Third Dečani Charter.

We can only imagine the old beauty of the church on the basis of its present-day appearance. A view on the central part of the naos (nave). ▼





The repose of the Holy King of Dečani was sudden; he died a martyr's death before having the opportunity to see his church in all its beauty. In 1331 the lords of the young King Dušan rebelled, and apparently with his knowledge, they attacked the palace in Nerodimlje. St. Stefan was imprisoned in the fortress of Zvečan and two months later, on November 11/24, Dušan's men executed him. The venerable body of the Holy King was transferred to the monastery of Dečani and solemnly buried in the place that had been prepared as soon as construction of the church was finished. The young King Dušan assumed responsibility for the completion of his father's endowment and the appointment of the church, as well as its decoration with frescoes.

Dušan himself recorded in his Charter of 1343 the miraculous revelation of the holiness of his father. St. Stefan of Dečani appeared in visions to the church sexton and the abbot of the Monastery with the order that his body be exhumed from the tomb. The archbishop and Assembly of Bishops prayerfully opened his tomb and found the King's remains intact and fragrant. The holy relics were then placed in a reliquary in front of the iconostasis (temple) and displayed for all to see.

Many people in distress, the blind, the deaf-mute, the weakened and especially barren women and the mentally ill who approached the saint with faith and prayer were healed. Although many centuries have passed, even today the saintly body of the Holy King rests intact in its reliquary before the iconostasis of the church of Dečani and is the source of miracles.





▲ Service to St. Stefan of Dečani, manuscript from 1500.



▲ Paraklesis to St. Stefan of Dečani, manuscript from 1500.





▲ Abbot Arsenije



▲ Abbot Danilo

The first abbot of Visoki Dečani, Arsenije, a great ascetic and hermit who lived a life equal-to-the-angels, is mentioned in the Life (Biography) of the Holy King of Dečani, and we can find frescoes bearing his image in the narthex and altar section of the Dečani church. The image of his successor Danilo is also displayed at Dečani in the chapel of St. Nicholas. During their time, the Monastery was at the peak of its glory and wealth. Unfortunately, it did not remain in its original splendor for even a whole century because soon after the Battle of Kosovo (1389), Dečani suffered in the wave of oncoming Turkish conquerors.



▲ The beginning of the Charter of Princess Milica (later nun Evgenija), 1397.



▲ Lady Evgenija, a medallion from the Dečani choros, 14th century.

Princess Milica (later nun Evgenija) and her sons, Princes Stefan and Vuk, visited the Monastery and found it in miserable condition, whereupon she wrote in her charter that *that into which the holy founder has invested so much effort . . . has been torched and destroyed by the evil Ismailites (Ottomans)*. The Lazarević dynasty restored what had been destroyed, returned its usurped properties to the Monastery, and gave it new gifts.



Thanks to them, and later to the Branković dynasty, despite the Turkish conquest Visoki Dečani continued to be the spiritual and cultural center of Metohija and the place in which many educated monks lived.

◀ The Gospel written and decorated by monk Nikandar at the Dečani hermitage of Belaje, 1494.

Wax candles over two meters high donated to the Monastery by Princess Milica to be lit by the future liberators of Kosovo. ▶

The Monastery finally fell under the Ottoman rule in 1455 and would remain a part of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the twentieth century. Although many of its landholdings were taken from it, the Monastery retained important privileges and won the favor of Ottoman sultans; according to imperial edicts (fermans), the abbots held the status of sipahis (feudal lords) and imperial falconers. As a result of these titles, the Monastery was protected by the laws of the Ottoman Empire and it was not required to pay tax on its property; the abbot also had the right to an armed escort when he traveled. The provisions of the law, however, were frequently no obstacle to local Ottoman feudal lords in committing various acts of violence against the Monastery; consequently, the Dečani monks were forced to exert many efforts to preserve the Monastery and its sacred relics.

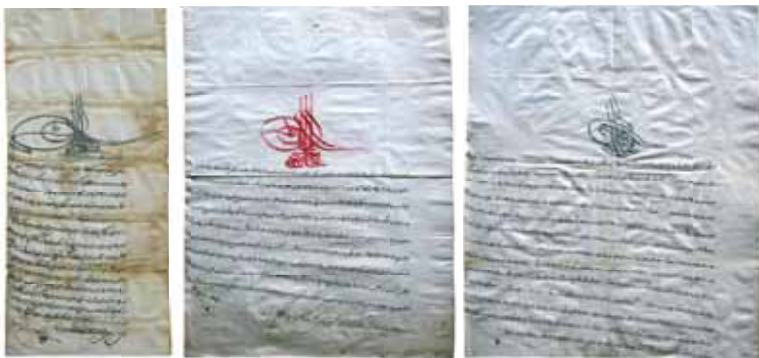


▲ Fermans of Sultans Bayazid II (1506) and Suleiman I „the Magnificent“ (1539) confirming the privileges of Dečani abbots and exemptions from paying taxes to the local beys.



We learn about the difficulties with which the monastery brotherhood was confronted from numerous old Serbian records and preserved Ottoman fermans from Istanbul secured by Dečani abbots on several occasions in order to protect the Monastery. Ottoman historical sources prove that violence and usurpation of property grew more frequent in the second half of the sixteenth century when the demographics of the villages around Dečani changed. Serbs who had converted to Islam and immigrants from Albanian mountains mercilessly targeted the unprotected monastery land without regard for the Serbian Christian monastery.

▼ Fermans of Sultans Murad IV (1640), Abdul Hamid I (1779) and Abdul Mejid I (1847).



Hundreds of preserved orders, court verdicts of sultans and judges as well as many records in books and testimonies of the monastery visitors show that from year to year difficulties in which Dečani monks lived in the Albanian surrounding multiplied.



◀ The beginning of the Gospel of Mark, 1550-1560.

Royal doors, painted by Longin, 1550-1560. ▼



At the same time, the restoration of the Peć Patriarchate (1557) created a creative impetus in the life of the Monastery: printed liturgical books were obtained, and a large cross and royal doors were made for the iconostasis. The well-known works of monk Longin of Dečani, who painted icons and wrote ecclesiastical poetry, came into being at this time.

The Austrian Army's wars with the Ottomans and occasional rebellions against the Ottoman rule in the Balkans regularly ended with terrible acts of vengeance against the Serbian population and great migrations of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija to the north, across the Sava and Danube Rivers, the largest of which took place in 1690 and 1739. Visoki Dečani was not spared from looting and torching of its buildings, and the torture and murder of its monks. The monastery brotherhood, led by courageous abbots full of zeal and love for this holy shrine, constantly sought to protect what it had inherited from the founders. The cult of the Holy King of Dečani survived throughout this time, even among many non-Orthodox Albanians. Various miracles are confirmed in written records of St. Stefan helping the destitute, protecting the people and his endowment, and punishing aggressors.



▲ Hajji Danilo Paštrović-Kažanegra, a tireless and dedicated Dečani abbot, spent a full forty years, ending in 1811, building stone walls, restoring the monastery buildings and decorating the church with donations collected from Bulgaria to the Holy Land, and from Russia to the Holy Mountain.



▲ Hajji Danilo's disciple and successor, Hajji Zaharija. "For this church I give my soul!" is written next to his portrait.



▲ Ferman of Sultan Abdul Hamid I ordering the Peć magistrate to protect Abbot Danilo of Dečani from insults and attacks on the monastery.



▲ The book of oaths from the eighteenth century, unique in the Christian world, is a record of the commitment of the monks of Visoki Dečani. In the most difficult of times, they promised they would not leave the Monastery under any circumstances unless taken from it as slaves. This oath was signed by several generations of Dečani monks.



The further history of the Monastery is full of events and changes. The beginning of nineteenth century was marked by many wars and unrests in the Balkans. Repressive measures by the Ottoman administration against the Christians were also felt in Dečani: Metropolitan Zaharija was imprisoned and several Dečani monks were killed in 1821. From the mid-nineteenth century, however, the violence became unbearable. The Dečani brotherhood pleaded in letters to Serbian princes and Russian

emperors for protection from the Albanians and proselyte campaigns by Roman Catholic Austrian agents who, taking advantage of the difficult situation, offered the Monastery their sponsorship and money in exchange for acceptance of the union. The Serbo-Turkish Wars (1876-1878) and the founding of the Albanian League in Prizren (1878) brought new troubles and terrible pogroms that decimated Serbian population in the villages.

Visitors to the Dečani Monastery with a Turkish police escort, beginning of the 20th century. ▼





▲ As a result of inter-Albanian conflicts between *dukes* from Dečani protecting the Monastery against Malisori tribe (from Albania) who came to loot it – Visoki Dečani found itself under a two year-long Albanian siege (1901-1902), and a Turkish garrison of about twenty soldiers was housed inside the Monastery with the task of protecting it.



◀ Dečani abbot Serafim Ristić was almost killed by the Turks for writing and publishing the booklets *Dečanski spomenici* (Monuments of Dečani) and *Plač Stare Srbije* (The Cry of Old Serbia) in 1864.

the Albanian units, solemnly entered the Monastery on November 20, 1912 and venerated the holy relics of St. Stefan of Dečani.



The international situation, marked by the rivalry of Austro-Hungary and Russia over spheres of influence in Old Serbia and Macedonia, made the position of the Serbian population even more difficult. Not even such capable abbots and archimandrites as Serafim Ristić, Sava Dečanac and Rafailo Matinac were able to do much. In the Dečani Monastery *Pomenik* (Commemoration book) we find entries such as these: next to the name of hieromonk Visarion – *killed 24/12 1903 by Albanians*; next to hieromonk Rufim – *killed in Gorioč 8 August 1907 by Albanians*; next to Miloš – *killed 10 Nov. 1896*; next to Nikola– *1905. killed*. The war of the Balkan states against the Turks brought freedom to Visoki Dečani. The Montenegrin Army, led by General Janko Vukotić, scattered

▲ Eminent and respected Albanian clan leaders from the village of Dečani were paid well to live permanently in the Monastery and protect it for more than a century until the beginning of the Balkan Wars. The courageous Dečani Duke Billal Rusta was one of the Albanians for whom it was an honor to protect Visoki Dečani.

During the World War I, after the defeat of the Serbian and Montenegrin armies in the autumn of 1915 and the withdrawal of Serbian troops through Albania, Dečani, like other Serbian monasteries in Old Serbia and Macedonia, was left to the mercy of the Bulgarian Army. The Bulgarian soldiers loaded a full wagon of Dečani's precious artifacts and another wagon with the holy relics of St. Stefan of Dečani and attempted to take them from the Monastery to Bulgaria. There are written records of how the wagon with the holy relics of the King would not move from Dečani property and subsequently had to be returned to the church. The Austrians, who replaced the Bulgarians, imprisoned the Russian monks who had come to live to the Monastery in 1903 in a camp in Hungary and used the monastery as a military warehouse.

Freedom was brought to Dečani again by Serbian military leader Kosta Pećanac and his volunteer guard on October 12, 1918. Upon assuming administration of the Monastery, the new abbot Archmandrite Leontije Ninković wrote: *Dečani was empty in every sense. The cells were looted and stripped to the bare walls and roof, the floors full of holes; the doors in disrepair; the windows broken; the gardens fenceless; the fruit trees damaged...* The abbot repaired the

Monastery buildings and managed to return a part of the Monastery's holdings through the courts. He also secured the sponsorship of King Aleksandar Karađorđević of Yugoslavia for the Monastery in 1924 when the King visited Dečani. The comprehensive restoration of the Monastery was carried out in the decade before the World War II. Many experts such as Lazar Mirković, Đurđe Bošković and Vladimir Petković did their research here and wrote about the Monastery.



▲ Archmandrite Leontije Ninković

In 1933 a Monastic School began work at Dečani. In this picture Holy Bishop Nikolaj (Velimirović) is shown with the students and teachers. ▼





▲ Bishop Serafim in front of Dečani Monastery. The Bishop was arrested and deported to Albania where he died a martyr's death in 1945.

On the first day of Pascha, April 20, 1941, the German Army entered Dečani. The same month the Germans were replaced by Italian carabinieri, who guarded the Monastery from the Ballists (Albanian fascists) throughout the war. When the war ended, the atheist Communist government of the new Yugoslavia confiscated about 800 hectares of fertile fields and forests from

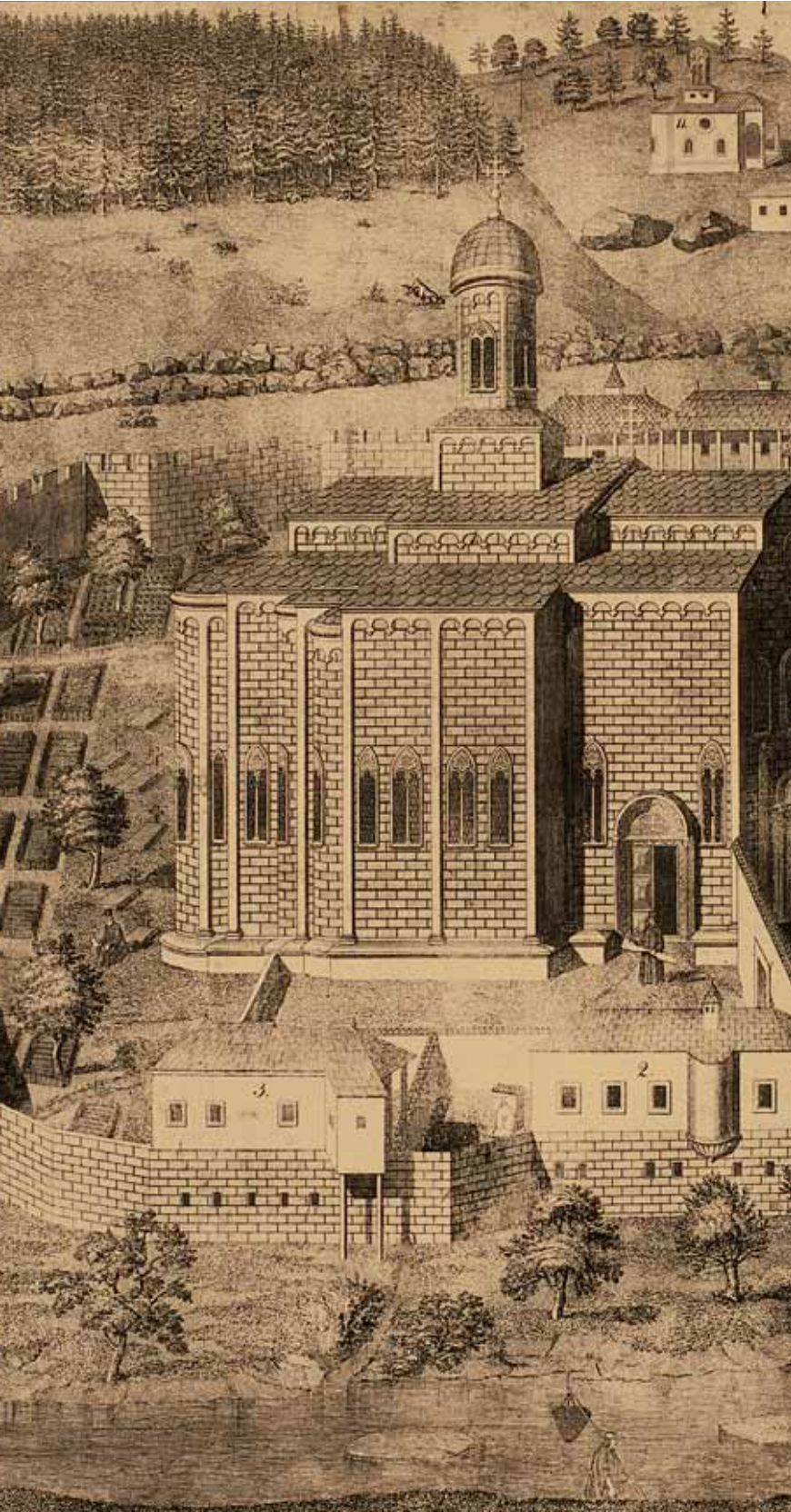
the Monastery. Nevertheless, church life was sustained in this period thanks to the determination and energy of Dečani abbots Archimandrite Makarije Popović and his successor, Archimandrite Justin Tasić. With the help of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Belgrade, much work was done on the conservation and restoration of the Monastery's antiquities.



▲ Archmandrite Makarije



▲ Archmandrite Justin





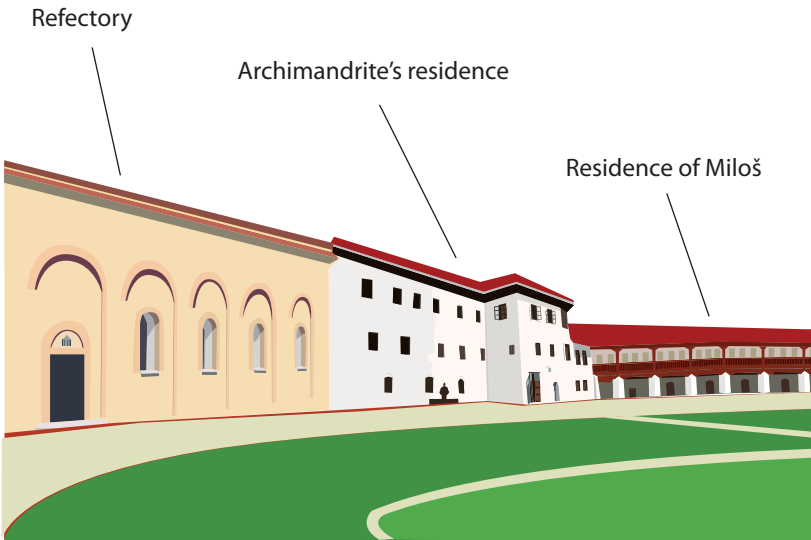
MONASTERY BUILDINGS

Unlike the church, almost all other monastery buildings have changed their original appearance during the course of history. Witnesses of the earliest monastery buildings mention *a large and praiseworthy tower with well-sounding bells* and a refectory so harmonious and beautiful that *it was wondrous to those who beheld it with other large palaces arranged in a single row*. The Monastery had a hospital, the first of its kind in medieval Serbia. All that remains of the strong and tall periphery wall that fenced in the Monastery from the very beginning are parts that have been incorporated into later monastic buildings or remnants used as foundations for restored walls. The remaining sections of the large monastery units preserved to our day nevertheless help us to imagine the beauty and monumentality of Dečani Monastery at the time of its founder, King Stefan Uroš III.



The entrance gate of the Monastery is located on the southwest side, on ground that is raised above the plateau with most of the monastery buildings, thus making it possible to view almost the entire monastery

complex when first entering Visoki Dečani. In the center is the church of Christ's Ascension, and at approximately equal distances from it in a rough circle are the monks' quarters and other monastery buildings.

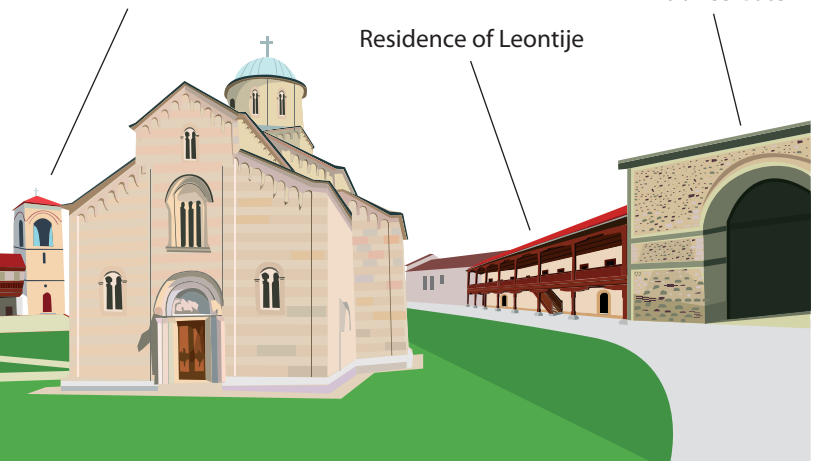




Bell tower

Residence of Leontije

Entrance Gate



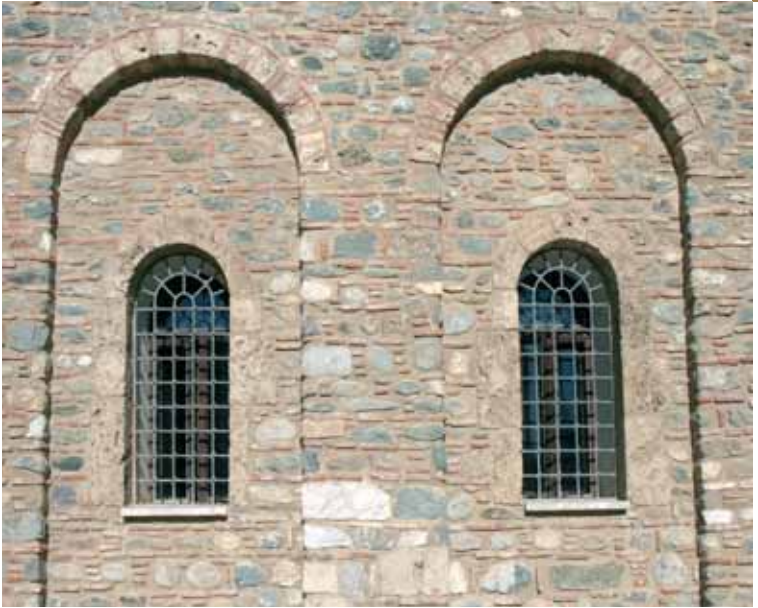


The most important building in the Monastery besides the church is the refectory. It also stands out from other monastic buildings by its partial religious use as regulated by the monastery rule (typicon).

Beside prayers before and after meals, during the meals lives of saints are read in calendar order of their celebration. As a strong, well-built building, the Dečani refectory withstood the first destructive attacks of the Turks on the Monastery and remained unchanged until the

beginning of the 15th century. At that time Grigorije Camblak described it as “the largest of buildings” and artistically designed. It is built of shaped stone and brick in such a way that every stone block is framed by rows of brick. On the basis of remnants and written sources, we can conclude that the interior of the original Dečani refectory was a large and opulent hall decorated with murals, with a stone floor of selected arranged stone tiles and tables of marble breccia.





The rectangular room was 32.5 meters in length and 10.5 meters in width and ended on the east end in a semicircular apse. Since there were between 14 and 17 large marble tables in the refectory, more than 150 members of the monastic brotherhood could take part in communal meals. During reconstruction after a fire in the previous century, the refectory was divided into three chambers. There is a larger formal hall on the east side and a smaller refectory for the monks to the west.



▲ The only original furniture that has been preserved is the abbot's table with stone chair in the middle of the spacious apse of the large hall.





The archimandrites' residence, built between 1786 and 1789, is connected on the west side with the refectory and its entrance is opposite the north entrance to the church. A second story was added to the archimandrites' quarters during the time of Abbot Antim in 1851. The second story was built in the same fashion as the older one below it, with cells facing the monastery courtyard and a passageway along the external wall. In the archmandrite's quarters there is the Monastery library which is also used as a meeting room for the brethren and distinguished guests.

Library on the second floor of the archimandrites' residence ▼





The largest of several construction projects in the Monastery during the 19th century was the restoration of the large building just east of the archimandrites' residence known as the *royal palace*. Restored by Abbot Teofil, the building was financially assisted by Serbian Prince Miloš Obrenović; thus, it became known as the Residence of Miloš. The spatial design of the ground floor and upper story of the Residence of Miloš is basically the same. At both levels a large porch faces the monastery courtyard with a row of monks' cells along the external wall. An open stairway was built next to the east wall of the residence leading to the upper floor.



▲ Decoration on a pillar plinth

▼ Terrace of Residence of Miloš





All that remains of the multi-story defensive entrance tower is the ground floor. In 1926 a new roof frame was installed and a new iron gate replaced the old wooden entrance gate. The general height and internal organization of other known monastery towers suggest that the Dečani entrance tower must have been at least three more floors tall beside the 9 meter tall ground floor level.

Written sources tell us that this most dominating part of the monastery complex included a chapel dedicated to Saint George and that it was topped by *well-sounding bells*. From the bell-towers of other monasteries, we can conclude that upper floors were used for the library, for the storage of liturgical items in the event of danger or as solitary cells for the most eminent monks.





The guest residence to the south of the church and to the east of the entry tower was restored in 1924 by the enterprising Dečani elder Archimandrite Leontije Ninković with the sponsorship of King Aleksandar Karađorđević of Yugoslavia. A large porch on the ground floor and the upper story was incorporated into the spatial design following the model of the older residence of Miloš. It faces the monastery courtyard with cells along the old fence walls, which in this location have retained significant height. The residence of Leontije was reconstructed in 2005.





◀ *The hermitage of the Holy King of Dečani is located high in the cliff above the left bank of the Bistrica River. It once had a high first floor and four more stories. The entrance on the first floor, was accessible by means of a removable ladder that could be pulled up if necessary. It was a sort of small fortress suitable as a shelter in the event of an attack on the Monastery.*



The only monastic buildings that have been preserved outside the monastery walls are hermitages and small cave churches in the canyon of the Bistrica River. Remnants of medieval buildings where monks lived solitary lives and conducted their religious services are

located in the steep cliffs near the monastery. A distinguished monastic brotherhood, well educated and thoroughly devoted to the ascetic solitary life resided, prayed and spiritually flourished in these Dečani hermitages. Written sources say that by the middle of the 14th century it



After some minor construction works the cave on the left bank of the Bistrica River was adapted to the needs of the hermits. It was obviously a part of a larger compound of residential and religious structures known as the *Hermitage of St. Helen*. ►



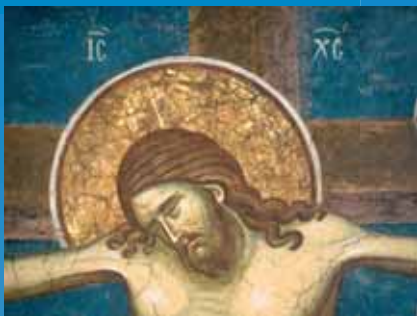
was home to the great elder and ascetic Avraam, the experienced and learned great Father Spiridon, a spiritual leader of noble origin, and his disciple Jakov. They were joined by the renowned desert-dweller

Jefrem, later a Serbian patriarch. There is evidence to suggest that the aforementioned Father Spiridon also became the patriarch who headed the Serbian Church at the time of the Kosovo Battle.



▲ The most well-known hermitage is that of the Most Holy Theotokos in Belaja, located two hours on foot from Dečani, high in the cliff above the left bank of the Bistrica. It is very difficult to access. The cave was shaped into a chapel by chiseling into the cliff, and there are remnants of artistically valuable frescoes on the walls. Some of manuscripts in the Dečani treasury were copied and illuminated in the cells around the church.





ASCENSION OF OUR LORD CHURCH

(architecture, sculptures, frescoes)

Immediately upon entering this building, the visitor to Dečani Monastery faces a complex work of art comprised of elaborate architecture and sculptures, murals and icons. By uniting Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine building experiences, the skillful artists from Kotor produced an original creation in design, construction and decoration. The Dečani monastery church (catholicon) contains the most sumptuous stone-carved ornamentation in Serbian medieval art, as well as the largest medieval gallery of frescoes.



Every observer, without exception, admires the strength and height of the Dečani church and the beauty of its façade and ornamentation. Hence the epithet *Visoki* or *High*, as Dečani is commonly known, came into use. What is so amazing, first of all, is the special architectural composition of the church interior, built as a five-nave domed basilica. The naves at both ends are shorter and on the

east side all end in apses of different dimensions. The expensive building material – two-colored marble stone polished to a shine – used so impeccably during construction also contributes to the grand appearance of the building. The elegant multi-colored façade consists of alternating rows of two kinds of marble: pale yellow onyx from Peć and reddish-purple breccia from Dečani.

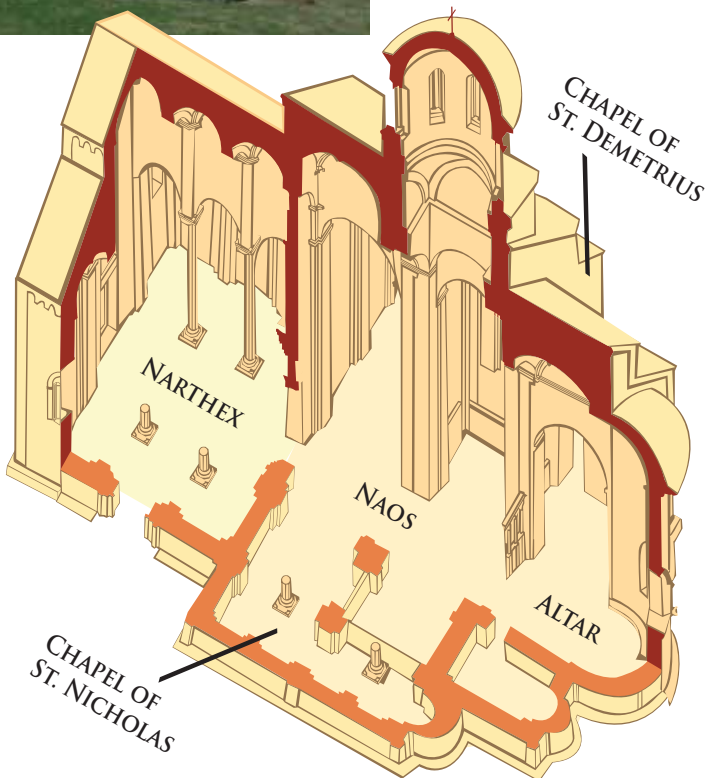
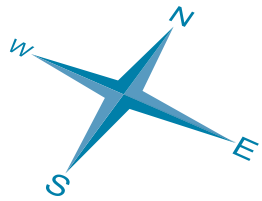


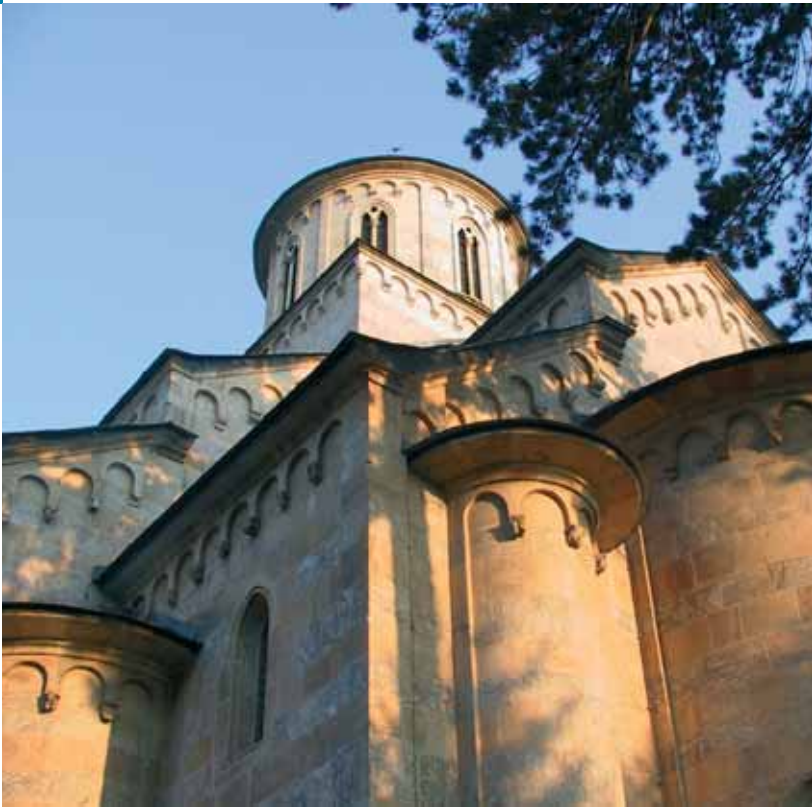


The Dečani church is more than 36 meters long, 24 meters wide and the height of its cupola reaches 29 meters.

In the liturgical sense, the church is divided into the altar section (sanctuary), the naos and the narthex. The naos includes the three central naves of the length of the church. High parapet stone slabs separate the chapels from the naos. The south chapel is dedicated to St. Nicholas and the north to St. Demetrius.

◀View of the church from the southeast







The area of the main part of the church – the naos – is widest and highest; in comparison to it, the altar section and the narthex are lower. The areas of the chapels are lowest and they are formed as separate volumes. Harmony is thus established by a progressive modeling of masses, and the gradual rise in the roof toward the central part of the building, which is crowned by a high cupola.



The sculptural ornamentation of the Dečani church is plentiful and diverse; in addition to many bas-reliefs, there are also compositions in high relief and full plastic renderings. Imaginative and scrupulously executed sculptural ornamentation in the form of unusual human and animal figures, mythical shapes and floral motifs is found on a hundred consoles in the arcade cornice to the roof.



All facades of the church are enhanced by the ornamental sculpture of the roof cornice.

The central naves of the church have a double-pitched roof, and single-sloped roofs cover the side naves. The entire roof is covered by lead plates.



▲ West façade of the church

Detail from west triple mullioned window ▼



On the large, closed façade surfaces, emphasis was placed on the architectural design of portals and windows, which are also decorated by sculptural elements. Among the wealth of reliefs ornamenting the Dečani church, two triple mullioned windows stand out particularly: one on the west façade; and the other on the altar apse. The windowsill, the inner frame and the tympanum are sculpturally ornamented on both but there are also full plastic renderings at the height of the capital on the external frame.

The tympanum of the altar tripple mullioned window is a leafy vine with the figures of a basilisk on the left side and a dragon swallowing a man on the right, while the tympanum of the west tripple mullioned window represents St. George slaying the dragon.

The stone ornamentation of both interior and exterior of the opulent Dečani building serve not only architectural and decorative functions but at the same time always reflect symbolically the builder's fundamental purpose – to extol the glory of God.



▲ East mullioned window

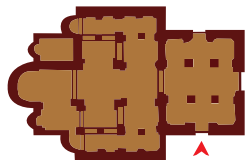


The tympana and capitals of dozens of mullioned windows are also ornamented with florals and figures.

The portals of the church are most richly ornamented. The Baptism of Christ is carved on the tympanum of the south portal. Depicted on either side behind Christ and St. John is a three-part multi-petal leaf with rounded tips, while at the foot of the composition we see the unruly waves of the Jordan River.



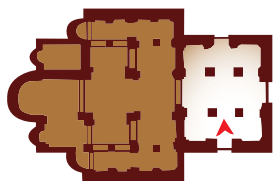
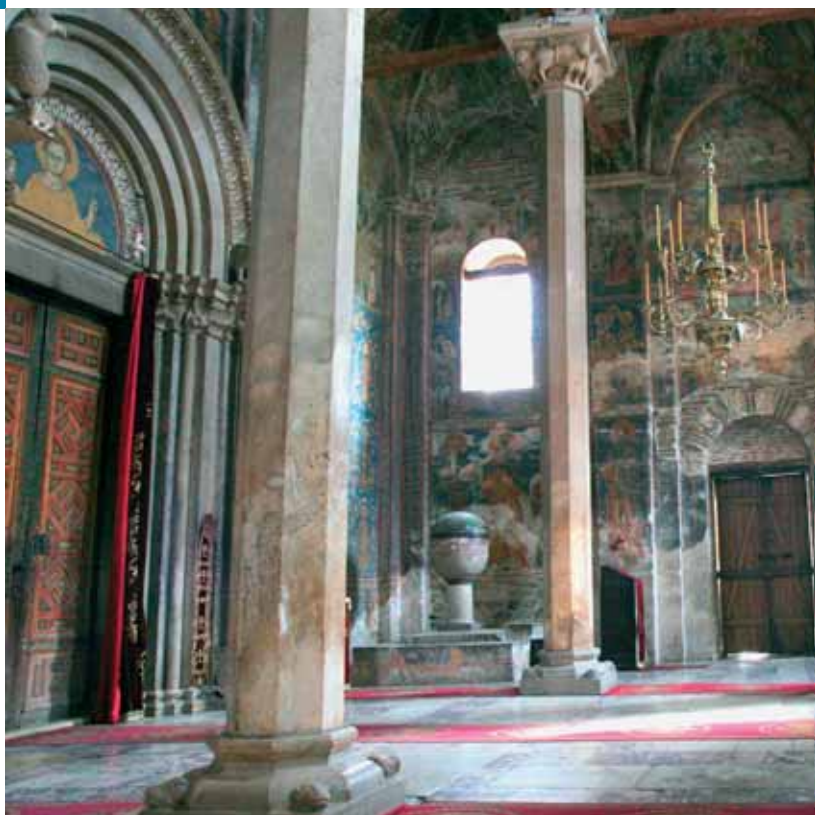
Today we most frequently enter the church through the north portal. This entrance has a rich sculptural ornamentation on the door-jambs, upper beam and arches, but no figures are shown on the tympanum except a flowering cross.





Above the west entrance a majestic scene depicts Christ on His throne between two angels, while at the foot of the throne rest the figures of two lions. On both side of tympanum are protruding panels with the figures of a lion and a griffon.





Upon entering the spacious and high narthex through any of the three doors, the visitor is found in the vestibule of the Dečani church. It is divided into three naves, separated from each other by marble pillars over six meters tall. Upon entering this area, one is astonished by many surrounding frescoes. The illustrated surfaces of the church of Dečani are almost too vast to be taken in by the human eye. All that was gradually created and perfected in Serbian and Byzantine churches over the course of decades was enhanced in Dečani to an unprecedented degree; no church, Serbian

or Byzantine, had previously had so many frescoes and in no other church was the entire history of salvation depicted in a single location as completely as here. The cumulative experience of late Byzantine art was woven into over one thousand scenes and several thousand individual figures divided into more than 20 cycles.

Many painters worked simultaneously or in succession on illustrating the church for about ten years (1338-1348), which was reflected in the variety of styles and artistic quality of the fresco painting. There is no doubt, however, that at the very beginning of the illustration of the Dečani church a comprehensive thematic plan was prepared for the structure as a whole and each individual space in it, and there were few deviations from it. This is the only possible explanation for the exceptional thematic harmony and unity of the frescoes.



The painters, whose names were not preserved, had an excellent mastery of the techniques of their trade. Their frescoes are well bound to the underlayer, the color is lasting and it has retained its intensity and freshness despite the centuries that have passed. The use of precious painting materials contributed to the ornamentality of the church interior, which was rich: traces of gold can still be seen on halos and clothing in many frescoes, and very expensive blue azurite (lapis lazuli) was also used.



The capitals and bases of the freestanding pillars of the narthex and naos were decorated with various floral and zoomorphic motifs. The four apostles in full plastic rendering were chiseled onto the capital of the northwest pillar in the narthex along with four large birds.



The narthex has an exceptionally rich iconographic plan. In addition to the images of saints and famous figures from the history of the Serbian people, this area includes illustrations of the Calendar of Saints, the Seven Ecumenical Councils and the Life of St. George.



The remembrance of all the saints and the most significant events from Christian history included in the church's annual cycle were recorded in illustrations, day by day, in the Dečani narthex. The menology or calendar usually begins with the first of September on the east wall of the narthex below the Ecumenical Councils, which are depicted in the vaults. Memorable scenes from the lives of the saints, full of dramatic dynamism, stretch in order across the walls in circular belts from the top down.



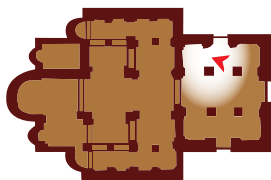


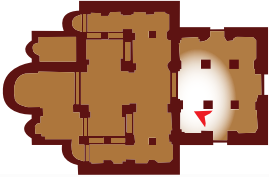
On the east side of the narthex, just south of the portal leading to the naos, there is an artistic rendering of the family tree of the Nemanjić dynasty, a composition nurtured in Serbian painting beginning with the monastery of Gračanica. ▼



The root of the tree is in the hands of St. Simeon Nemanja, and to his right and left are his sons, St. Sava and St. Stefan the First-Crowned, the founders of the autocephalous church and the kingdom in Serbia, respectively. Above them are other descendants of Nemanja, woven into the vine, its smaller branches and flowers, some rendered in full figure and others in bust form. Nothing in the painting is random; as in other Dečani compositions, everything is carefully planned and executed. The purpose of this illustration was to emphasize the longevity and holy origin of the ruling family, whose later descendants would found the Dečani church, and to show that their authority, like that of their ancestors, rested on family right and the blessing of God.

A font for water consecrated on the feast of the Theophany, hewn from marble breccia, was placed in front of this fresco.





The chapel in the northern part of the narthex is dedicated to St. George. The painter, therefore, made an effort to depict the most important events from the life of this famous great-martyr on the east wall of the chapel, i.e. on its most visible section: the torture on the wheel, the killing of the dragon, the sentencing and the beheading of St. George.





The variety of ornamental decorations on the entrance from the narthex into the naos largely contributes to the monumental appearance of the church interior. The capitals, interior and external arches of the portals are all decorated. The tympanum of this portal does not have any sculptural ornamentation. It is illustrated with an image of *Christ Emmanuel*. In compensation, two pairs of animals rendered in full sculpture above the portal and at its base guard the entrance to the church, protecting the border between the holy and the profane.

On the wall above the portal are the images of founders Holy Stefan of Dečani and King Dušan shown in prayerful supplication to Christ Pantocrator (the All-Maintainer) from whom they receive scrolls carried by a cherub – a sign of God's blessing.





Entering from the narthex into the central part of the church, the monumental appearance of the church interior is overwhelming. All the walls and vaults are covered with frescoes. There are sixteen great cycles in the naos, and a large number

of images of saints depicted in the form of standing figures.

On the front sides of the wide pillars on the right and left sides are frescoes of Christ and the Theotokos (the Holy Virgin). Christ is depicted with a sword in His hand, which is rare indeed, a sword that is the *cutting blade for sin*, while the Theotokos is once again a suppliant before Christ, first of all for the founder and benefactor of Dečani Monastery, whose tomb lies nearby, but also for every pilgrim who enters the church.

The marble tomb of Saint Stefan of Dečani is located in the western part of the south nave next to the chapel of Saint Nicholas and above the place where the King's mortal remains rested until his glorification in 1343. The marble tomb to the left

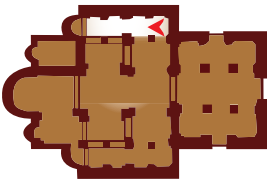
is similar to the King's but is lower and smaller. According to the tradition St. Jelena Srpska (Saint Helen of Serbia), the sister of Holy King Stefan of Dečani, the latter Empress of Bulgaria who finally became a nun rests in it.



▲ Depicted opposite the tombs, on the west wall of the naos, is an enormous Tree of Jesse, a complex presentation encompassing the Old and New Testaments. The starting point for this presentation is the well-known verse in the prophecy of Isaiah regarding Christ as a shoot from the stump of Jesse, the father of King David, whose descendant was to be the Most Holy Theotokos. The Dečani Tree of Jesse is the most comprehensive and complete in Byzantine painting, comprised of the images of a large number of Christ's predecessors in body, as well as events from the Old and New Testaments and the prophets who foretold these events.

In the highest reaches of same part of the church there are several other scenes from the Old Testament which announce future events and the coming of the Savior: the story of Solomon's wisdom and scenes from the Book of the prophet Daniel.





The south chapel in Dečani is dedicated to Saint Nicholas. Its iconostasis

from 1818 like the iconostasis in the chapel of St. Demetrius, which is a few years older, is an expression of so called late Balkan Baroque, a style whose external polish and overbearing ornamentality dominated high relief engraving and painting in the region of the central Balkans in the period between mid-18th to the mid-19th century.

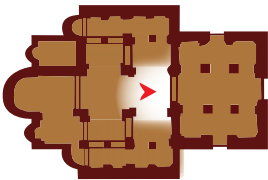


▲ A comprehensive cycle from the life of St. Nicholas and miracles is shown in the eastern part of the chapel dedicated to him, with the first scene in the vaults and the last, as in other hagiographic cycles, in the apse.



The Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos, the renowned hymn in honor of the Theotokos, is shown almost in its entirety at Dečani. It begins in the vault of the south choir area in the naos, moving from there into the higher sections of the chapel of St. Nicholas. ▼





Crossing from the south to the north chapel through the western part of the naos, we can see scenes from the Second Coming of Christ on the vault, the wall and the pillars. The sequence of events begins at the highest point of the vault with His descent from Heaven on a

throne lowered by two angels. Instead of Christ the Final Judge, we see Christ the Pantocrator with an almost meek expression depicted in Dečani as He addresses the blessed with words from the open Gospel on His knee and motions with His hand that they are to receive the Kingdom of Heaven. In addition to angels, twelve separate scenes depict choruses of the righteous, the supplicants of humankind before Christ with their hands raised in prayer: apostles, martyrs, saints, bishops, monks, prophets, and the righteous of the Old Testament.



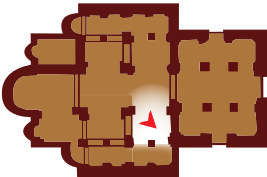
Pictures of Heaven: The Theotokos on the throne, the repentant thief with the cross, the righteous in the embrace of Abraham and others, are painted on the pillars opposite the west wall. Below the scenes of Heaven on the pillars the fate of those suffering the tortures of hell is shown.



▲ Undying worm

◀ Deepest darkness





▲ The composition of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos (the Assumption of the Holy Virgin), one of the most important feast days, is separate and expanded here, comprising a special cycle of five scenes painted on the west wall of the naos above the portal.

Conversion of Apostle Paul on his way to Damascus. ▼



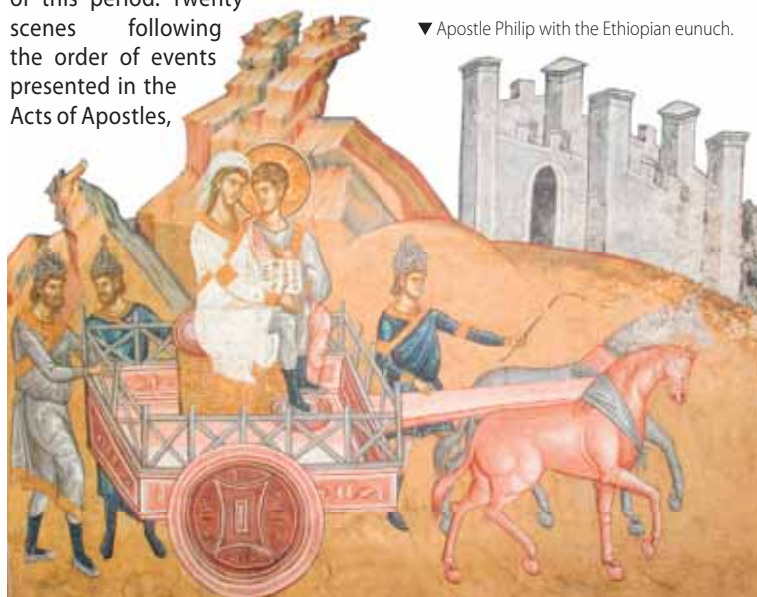


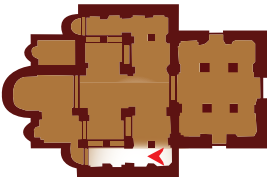
▲ The rescue of Apostles Peter and John from prison.
The confession and martyrdom of St. Stephen the Protomartyr.

The cycle of frescoes about Christ's disciples is located in the northwest-ern part of the Dečani naos as far as the north chapel. This cycle is relatively rare in Byzantine and Western churches, and in many respects is a unique phenomenon in the art of this period. Twenty scenes following the order of events presented in the Acts of Apostles,

starting from the vault and gradually descending to the surrounding walls and pillars, tell the history of the miracles, missionary activity and martyrdom of Apostles Peter and John, Philip, Paul and St. Stephen the Protomartyr.

▼ Apostle Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch.





The present-day iconostasis in the north chapel is wider and contains a greater number of icons than the one in the south. The master artists were the same: Trajko Rekalija, son of Doče Skopljanac, did the wood-carving, and painters Simeon and Aleksije Lazović of Bijelo Polje did the paintings.



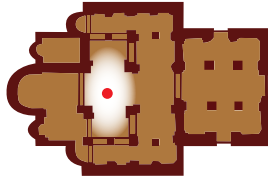
A very interesting Old Testament cycle of scenes from the creation of the world and humankind and man's subsequent disobedience to God's commandment is depicted in this chapel: historical scenes about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah the Righteous, and the building of the tower of Babel. Almost 50 scenes, to which six more individual images of the righteous from the Old Testament have been added, are distributed in the vaults and in two belts that descend down to the walls of the chapel.

In addition to scenes from the *Book of Genesis*, the walls of the chapel are decorated with scenes from the life of St. Demetrius to whom the chapel is dedicated. These include no less than twelve scenes from his Life, some depicted for the first or the only time in the whole of Byzantine art.

▼ Righteous Noah trims his vineyard







The area in the central part of the naos under the cupola is distinguished by its beauty and the geometric arrangement of its marble floor tiles. An ambo rosetta of polished onyx and breccia is inset in a square area. The diagonally arranged pattern in it was hollowed out and filled with lead, and then covered with golden tiles.



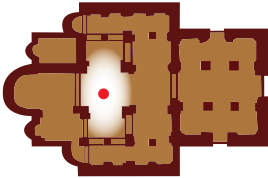
◀ This is highest and most spacious part of the naos, covered by the cupola, which rests on four massive pillars. The All-Maintainer in the Dečani cupola was planned and executed in an especially majestic form: the background behind Him was done in gold, creating the impression that the light of Heaven surrounded Him, and His halo and clothing were covered with golden leaves.



▲ A great bronze choras – a hanging candleholder with many candles (earlier it held icons and icon lamps as well) is suspended on long chains hooked to the base of the cupola and lowered to within three meters of the floor. Composed of eight broad bands, it is decorated with ornamental griffons woven into a small vine with inscriptions of the names of the benefactors. It was presented to Dečani as a gift by King Dušan, and subsequently restored in 1397 by Princess Milica and her sons Stefan and Vuk, who replaced the parts that were missing. According to the tradition, these parts were smelted from the weapons of the fallen knights of the Battle of Kosovo Polje.



◀ Holy Prophet Isaiah



Monumental figures of the prophets with highly characteristic, powerful physiognomies are arranged below the Pantocrator, who is surrounded by an illustration of the Heavenly Liturgy.



Holy Prophet Jeremiah ▶

In accordance with the customary plan for the decorative painting of churches, the evangelists were placed in the pendentives under the prophets, as immediate witnesses of the One whose coming the prophets had foretold. The evangelist John is shown with his disciple, St. Prochorus. ▼





▲ Transfiguration



In the zones under the cupola are the magnificent compositions of the feast days of Christ and the Theotokos, which have been almost perfectly preserved. The great feast days are arranged in the order of their occurrence on the walls under the cupola and the arched surfaces below them.

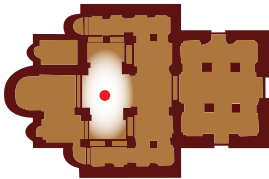
◀ Baptism of Christ

▼ Annunciation





▲ Healing of the ten lepers



The architecture of the church created considerable difficulties for the designers and painters of frescoes. Where the areas were clearly defined by walls (the narthex and altar section), the fresco plan was presented in a viewable and clear manner; in the naos, however, the walls were removed and practically reduced to pillars, which was highly unsuitable for the development of comprehensive cycles. This difficulty was overcome quite skillfully

though. In the central belts of this space, scenes are represented from Christ's life on Earth – miracles and teachings, which easily surpass all others in the churches of the Byzantine world by their number. The presentation of these scenes did not require a strict chronological order since their order of presentation in the Gospels does not always correspond, either. These cycles, like others, do not always respect the borders of the naos but move freely into other areas, apses and chapels once again showing that the entire church was conceived as a whole and thus painted.

▼ Healing of the demoniacs at Gadara





▲ Jesus expels the merchants from the temple

◀ Jesus in the house of the Pharisee



The cycle of Christ's sufferings is depicted in detail in the higher parts of the naos. It begins on the arch in the western part of the church with the Last Supper, stretching across the pillars that hold up the cupola and finishes in the vault of the altar section.

▼ Removal from the Cross

▼ Peter's renunciation



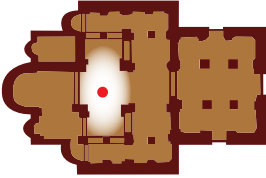


On the right and left side of the naos under the cupola are the choir areas, which the parapet walls separate from the chapel and the western part of naos. In the right choir area is an elaborate, marble king's throne, similar to Western European royal thrones, with a raised back and slightly arched sides ending in armrests ornamented with rosettes.



The illustration of the Church, as the community of God and humankind, all the saints – from the oldest to the newly recognized – and the living, is most completely and visibly demonstrated on the lowest painted belt of the Dečani church. At almost the same height and of the same size as the people in the church, these individual and forward facing figures of the saints were painted very carefully and with a wealth of gold. Most are holy warriors but there are also hermits, non-mercenary physicians

and Serbian saints; many of them are shown giving a blessing or teaching by means of words written on their scrolls.



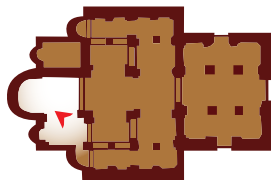
The altar section is separated from the naos by a stone chancel - iconostasis. The iconostasis is from the 14th century and is completely preserved. ▼



▲ Capital of a pillar from the iconostasis





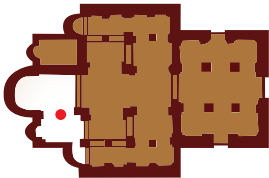


The altar section is divided into three parts: the center with the Holy Table, the prothesis to the north, and the diakonikon (sacristy) to the south. The high altar apse – a semicircular area containing a large fresco of the Theotokos Oranta – *Wider than the Heavens* – encloses not only the altar section but also the naos from the east side in a striking manner.



▲ The stone bishop's throne in the apex of the apse, which is surrounded by a stone bench for the priests (synthronon).





▲ Life of the Theotokos according to the text of the Protogospel of Jacob is illustrated in 16 scenes on the walls of the prothesis.

The Apostles' communion with Christ the Great Archpriest is shown at the top of the apse. ▼





The lowest belt depicts the serving of the Liturgy by Holy Hierarchs. Shown in the center of this composition is a Holy Table upon which lies the small Christ the Lamb, who sacrifices and is Himself sacrificed, who receives and who is distributed. The Holy Hierarchs, led by John Chrysostom and Basil the Great, approach the Lamb from both sides one after the other with unrolled scrolls in their hands upon which the beginnings of prayers and blessings from their liturgical texts are written. The selection of the bishops in the composition is not historical but symbolic, reminding of the unity and consistency of faith, of the fact that all churches of the Christian Orthodox community throughout the ages serve one and the same Liturgy.



St. Athanasius
of Alexandria ▲







DEČANI TREASURY

As a place of pilgrimage for almost seven hundred years, the Dečani church has constantly received gifts, which over the course of time have built an exceptionally valuable treasury that shines with the beauty of old icons, furniture decorated with wood inlays, precious ornamented liturgical artifacts, manuscripts and printed books. In terms of its artistic, cultural and historical value, it surpasses all other treasuries of Serbian cultural heritage except that of Hilandar.

Among all the collections of the Dečani treasury, the most valuable is the icon collection. It is significant in several ways: in terms of number; of age; of provenance; and of quality. There are few locations where so many old icons have been preserved. A total of 90 icons rest in the treasury, ranging in age from those from the period when the monastery was founded in the 14th century to icons from the late Middle Ages, i.e. up to the end of the 17th century. The third characteristic is that most of these icons, whether a part of the iconostasis or choros or intended for veneration were specially painted for Dečani. Finally, one of the greatest attributes of the Dečani collection is the artistic quality of the icons; most of the samples originating prior to the eighteenth century are of exceptional artistic quality, some may even be said to represent the best in Serbian or Byzantine painting, in general.



▲ Icons in iconostasis, c. 1340. Five of the original altar icons have been preserved: Christ, the Theotokos, St. Gabriel the Archangel, St. John the Baptist and St. Nicholas. They are a great rarity, for very few Serbian icons from the 14th century have been preserved, let alone those still in an iconostasis, their intended place.



▲ St. Paul, 15th century



▲ Theotokos Pelagonitisa, 14th century



▲ St. Theodosios



▲ St. John Climacus



▲ St. Anthony the Great

▼ The Resurrection

▼ Christ and the Apostles

▼ Christ's Ascension



▲ Icons of the monk Longin, a well-known painter and poet. He visited Dečani on three occasions, in 1572, 1577 and 1596. He painted many icons and wrote the Akathist Hymn to the Holy King Stefan.



▲ The Holy Fore-Runner, painters Georgije and Kozma, 1619



▲ Hagiographic icon of St. Nicholas painted for Abbot Diomidije, c. 1620

Today Dečani possesses a rich collection of some 160 manuscripts and 17 old printed books. Most have a liturgical content and purpose: manuscripts of the Four Gospels, epistle books (apostola), prayer books for priests (hieratika), monthly calendars (menaia) and daily liturgical services (horologia), as well as the works of the Holy Fathers, rhymed prologues, and manuscripts related to the life of the Monastery.



▲ Flag in Apostol no. 25, 1350-1360



▲ Beginning of the Gospel of Luke in the Four Gospels, c. 1400



▲ Beginning of the Founding Charter of Dečani, 1330

Most of the books date back either to the time of the Monastery's founding and first years or to the 1390's. The manuscripts originated in Dečani hermitages and estates (metochia) although they were also frequently ordered from other monasteries, notably Hilandar, or from scribes in the wider monastery area. Several beautifully illuminated manuscripts, most of them of the Four Gospels, were added to the Dečani library during the time of the Serbian Despotate (1389-1459).



▲ Paresis of St. Ephrem of Syria with an entry about Dečani Abbot Arsenije, dated 1337



▲ Anthology of the Teachings of St. Isaac of Syria, 1360-1370



▲ Božidar Vuković's printed Menaion of Feast Days, 1536-1538

Dečani Monastery welcomed the appearance of the first printed books, not only by acquiring, collecting and binding them but also involving several Dečani monks directly in the process of printing. The oldest printed books in Dečani originate from the printing house of Đurađ Crnojević in Cetinje.

Octoechos Fifth Tone (a liturgical service book) from the Crnojević printing house, 1494 ►



▲ Dečani Commemoration Book, written and illuminated by Dimitrije Daskal, 1595.



A small collection of documents written in Serbian, consisting mostly of private legal acts, permits for the collection of alms and bishops' grammata, all written in calligraphy. The Parusija is also richly illuminated by miniatures of exceptional value.

Parusija, written and illustrated by Aleksije Lazović, c. 1818. ▼



▲ Ferman of Sultan Mustafa IV, 1808. Among the most numerous resources of the treasury is a collection of legal acts in the Turkish language, including sultans' edicts (ferman), pashas' orders (buyruldi), court rulings (huccet), Ottoman judges' (kadis), mis-sives (murasela), legal opinions by muftis (fatwa), permits (izun), etc. These were kept in the Monastery during the entire period of Turkish rule when these documents were necessary for the survival of the Monastery and its properties, and constituted proof of the Monastery's economic rights and status.

One of the richest and most valuable collections of the Dečani treasury is comprised of objects made of precious and other metals. The Arthos Panagia made of *unicorn* plated with silver undoubtedly belonged to the original treasury. The same is true of the lead ampoules found in the reliquary of St. Stefan of Dečani. The great bronze choros and floor standing candleholder also date back to the Monastery's founding. Of the large number of other precious objects listed in the founders' charters, none have been preserved, and most of the collection dates to the period from the 16th to the 19th century.

◀ Floor standing candleholder poured and engraved in bronze with feet in the shape of lions and a checkered decoration with engraved birds and heraldic lilies is a unique sample of floor standing bronze medieval candleholders, 14th century.

Arthos panagia, 12th-14th century ▼



Mastrelen's bell from 1458 with an inscription in Greek. ▼



▲ Also dating back to the Serbian Despotate is a large silver thurible wrought and engraved in silver in the Gothic style with filigree bands and molded friezes and rosettes.

Grgur's bell (a gift from the blind son of Despot Đurađ Branković) from the 1540's. ▼



◀ One of the most beautiful vessels in the Dečani treasury and product of artistic goldsmithing is a Zeon vessel in the shape of a small, covered decanter decorated with floral and herbal ornamentation with a serpentine handle and three animals on the cover (a dog chasing a wolf and a panther) most probably originating from the imperial workshop in Constantinople at the beginning of the 16th century.





The ripidia fashioned by goldsmith Kondo Vuk and ordered by Lord

Radivoj are famous among the antiquities of Dečani. Wrought in gold-plated silver with a depiction of a relatively complex composition of the Heavenly Liturgy, they represent a masterpiece of Serbian goldsmithing by an exceptionally talented master craftsman, excellent drawer and skillful engraver.



Radivoj's chalice from 1568 ▼



A small collection of icon-overlays dates from the period between the 14th and the 19th century and offers a historical overview of the development of different styles of overlaid icons in Serbia. ►



▲ Navicula (incense boat), 16th-17th century



▲ Goblet of Ignjatije of Dečani, 1840



▲ Goblet with hunting scenes, 16th century

There are 13 goblets in Dečani, most of them made of silver or silver alloy with partial gold-plating, decorated with hammering and engraving technique with motifs of animals, birds, flowers and stylized leaves.



▲ Several silver and gold-plated book bindings are an important part of the Dečani treasury. The most well known is Monk Kentirion's binding from 1644.



Cross of Tsar Dušan, with metal frame from the 17th century



Cross of Holy King Stefan of Dečani with frame added in the 17th century

Crosses make up a large and significant group in the collection of metal objects. There are 22 of them, all without exception standing, engraved in bas-relief and framed in silver which in some cases has also been gold-plated. The most opulent samples are decorated with precious and semi-precious stones.

The collection of oil lamps is numerous and includes 95 inventoried samples. There have always been many oil lamps in use in Dečani. In addition to hanging from the three Dečani iconostases, they were also attached to the choras as well as appearing in other locations in the church. All Dečani oil lamps are poured out of metal, mostly out of silver and silver alloy but also from copper and bronze. ►



▲ Judging from their representation in the Dečani treasury, belt buckles were often given as gifts to the Monastery, either alone or attached to belts. They were made of silver or mother-of-pearl and ornamented with jewels, pearls or enamel.



There are a total of sixteen reliquaries containing the holy remains of saints or other sacred objects related to them. They are very close to each other in terms of their period of origin and style. With few exceptions, they belong to the 19th century and the so-called 'Peasant Baroque'.



The collection of seals includes 25 samples mostly from the 19th century. Most are made from silver or bronze, and there are several kinds: founders, patrons, symbolic and iconographic, heraldic and monogram seals.

The oldest of the seven preserved copper engravings in Dečani Monastery which was made in Vienna in 1746 according to the design of Georgije Stojanović. The engraving was ordered by Patriarch Arsenije IV Jovanović Šakabenta. ►



The Monastery has a small collection of votive silver cradles of various sizes donated by couples without children. ▼



Since Visoki Dečani has never been abandoned and the Dečani church never burned or left roofless, as was the case with almost all larger Serbian monasteries, the most significant collection of wood objects has been preserved here beginning from the 14th and up to the 17th century: bas-reliefs, intarsia or simple carvings in wood.



▲ The first reliquary of St. Stefan of Dečani from 1343 is the most famous in the collection of wood objects in Dečani. It is also considered to be the most precious work of Serbian medieval bas-relief engraving. Two other engraved and gold-plated bas-relief reliquaries are kept at Dečani from the first half of the 19th century.



◀ The wooden abbot's throne originates from around 1330.

Sixteen other stasidia from the 17th century are kept in the Monastery, which are either freestanding or laterally connected. Their backrests are arched and at one time they had airily arranged lathed decorations; their sides are flat with lathed ends in the shape of apples, onions or small pillars. ▶



Details from iconostasis from the second half of the 16th century ▼

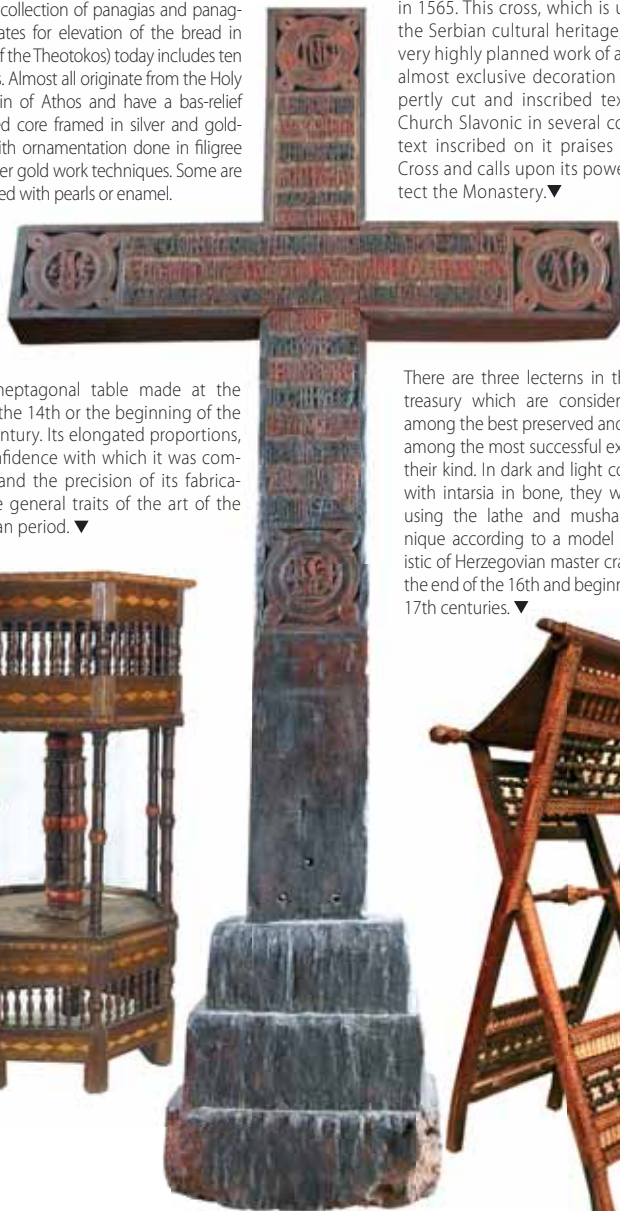




▲ The collection of panagias and panagiaria (plates for elevation of the bread in honor of the Theotokos) today includes ten samples. Almost all originate from the Holy Mountain of Athos and have a bas-relief engraved core framed in silver and gold-plate with ornamentation done in filigree and other gold work techniques. Some are decorated with pearls or enamel.



◀ Small wooden reliquary for holy relics decorated with mother-of-pearl, end of the 17th century.



The cross of Elder Nestor was made in 1565. This cross, which is unique in the Serbian cultural heritage, is also a very highly planned work of art whose almost exclusive decoration is an expertly cut and inscribed text in Old Church Slavonic in several colors. The text inscribed on it praises the Holy Cross and calls upon its power to protect the Monastery. ▼

Small heptagonal table made at the end of the 14th or the beginning of the 15th century. Its elongated proportions, the confidence with which it was composed and the precision of its fabrication are general traits of the art of the Moravian period. ▼



There are three lecterns in the Dečani treasury which are considered to be among the best preserved and probably among the most successful examples of their kind. In dark and light colored oak with intarsia in bone, they were made using the lathe and musharabi technique according to a model characteristic of Herzegovian master craftsman at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries. ▼







MONASTERY LIFE

Visoki Dečani is a cenobitic male monastery with a continuous monastic tradition since the 14th century. Today it is home to 25 monks and novices. The Monastery Abbot Archimandrite Fr. Sava Janjić, has led the brotherhood since 2011. In addition to its spiritual role, liturgical life and maintenance of the Holy King's brotherhood, the Monastery is a living organism with numerous activities ranging from wood carving to its Internet presentation, which comprise a unique whole and contribute to the fullness of the monastery's life. As a living treasury of Serbian Orthodox culture and national identity, it remains very important even today in the life of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija.



Seven young monks headed by then Abbot Teodosije, the current Bishop of Raška-Prizren, in 1992 came from Crna Reka Monastery to Visoki Dečani, where they replaced a small elderly monastic community. Since then the number of young men desiring a monastic life has grown each year; material conditions have improved; and the Monastery reestablished its former

significance. It was this strengthened community that faced armed conflicts in 1998 and 1999, when the monks assisted a significant number of residents of Dečani municipality regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation. Aid was largely provided in cooperation with the *International Orthodox Christian Charities* (IOCC) from the United States.







Immediately after the arrival of KFOR peacekeepers in Kosovo and Metohija, the Monastery was placed under the protection of Italian KFOR, which continues to guard it to this day. KFOR soldiers maintain round-the-clock control checkpoints and guard locations and regularly provide escorts for the travels of the monks, who still lack the freedom of movement. Despite its isolated life,

Dečani has preserved its traditional hospitality and is thus becoming one of the favorite destinations of numerous visitors, international civilian and military representatives. Orthodox Serbs, pilgrims from Kosovo and Metohija and other parts of Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina also visit the Monastery regularly with military or police escorts.







Monastic life, above all, means liturgical life, and regular religious services come first in the lives of the Dečani monks. The typicon (liturgical rule) includes the complete cycle of daily religious services, which begins at 5:00 a.m. with the midnight office, orthos (matins), the hours and Liturgy, and concludes in the evening with vespers and compline. Vigils the night before Sunday and other

religious feast days are especially solemn. Vigils usually last several hours while the church is lit by dozens of candles on the famous Dečani choro. Most beautiful of all are holiday and Sunday liturgies when the Monastery Abbot, Fr. Sava, officiates together with his fellow priest-monks. The chanting of the monks and the beauty of the church reach their fullest expression on those occasions.











The Akathist Hymn to the Holy King Stefan is served daily, and every Thursday evening the Paraklesis to this saint gathers Serb pilgrims as well as foreigners who want to learn more about Orthodox religious services. The most festive day of the year is the feast day of

the Monastery's patron saint, Holy King Stefan of Dečani, on November 11/24, also traditionally the day in the Monastery when novices are tonsured or monks elevated to higher offices. As many as several hundred pilgrims gather in the Monastery on that day.







Besides religious services and prayer, the monks spend most their time carrying out their tasks they have been assigned by the monastery abbot that serve to enhance the life of the whole community. In addition to regular tasks such as the preparation of food and the maintenance of the buildings, the monks also use the most modern technology, carry out administrative tasks and prepare publications for publishing. The brethren are also involved in translating texts by the Holy Fathers and maintaining the Monastery's renowned website. News and information about the life of the Church and Kosovo and Metohija Serbs is available on this site in English and Serbian, and in the past it has been one of the most reliable sources of news from this war-embroiled region.







With the exception of religious services, it is seasonal work that brings the greatest number of monks together in the same place. Most of these tasks are done during the summer and fall, when there is work to be done in the garden and on the preparation of canned and dried foods for the winter pantry. Icon painters, wood carvers, cooks, wine producers and beekeepers all participate in hay gathering, the harvesting of corn and the clearing of snow. Visitors and friends of the Monastery usually join the monks in seasonal tasks. The joy of community life is especially apparent during these times because everyone contributes to the community with his work and abilities.







The management of the monastery farm is a complex and demanding job involving caring for and supervising tasks essential to the life of the community. That is why the monks working on the farm make every effort, keeping in mind the present diffi-

culties, to provide as much of what is needed for the life of the brotherhood from monastery land. The most modern technology is used in agricultural tasks. The processing of milk and the production of cheese is especially well developed.





The fertile land around the Monastery makes it possible to sow cereals and potatoes, and in addition to the existing fruit trees new ones have been planted for the production of seasonal fruit for everyday use and the preparation of the winter pantry.





According to folk tradition Holy King Stefan himself planted the grapevines in Velika Hoča near Orahovac where Dečani vineyards are located. The growing of grapes and the production of the renowned lozovača (grape brandy) and Dečani wine is an “obedience” that takes place on the monastery estate (metochion) in Velika Hoča, a village with thirteen churches where, with the help of local residents, the wine cellar is managed by Dečani monks.





The Founding Charter, as well as later records, say that for centuries an old chestnut forest surrounded the Monastery, which was favorable for the development of beekeeping. Chestnut honey from this area is highly prized, and the monks continue to produce it today, using the unpolluted natural environment and its gifts.





The Monastery has a centuries' old tradition of icon painting. In the past, the best God-inspired masters worked and created here, attracted by the beauty and importance of this holy shrine.





The Monastery's modern icon painting workshop was developed immediately upon the arrival of the young brotherhood, and today there are four monks working in it. In addition to large icons for iconostases and thrones in churches, smaller icons suitable for households are also painted here. The Dečani icon painters follow Byzantine models and use traditional painting techniques with egg-based tempera and polished gold plating.





With their woodcarving work of more than a decade, the Dečani monks have equipped many Orthodox churches with iconostases, icon stands, lecterns and other church furniture. The gradual maturation and confidence in craftsmanship, changes in ornamentation and compositions can be seen by comparing the iconostasis



produced in the mid-1990s for the small cave church of Dajbabe Monastery near Podgorica, with Parteš near Gnjilane, the chapel of St. Maxim in Gračanica, the churches in Stuttgart and Göppingen in Germany, and the church of St. Vasilije of Ostrog in Leposavić, with the latest work in the newly built church of St. Dimitrije in Kosovska Mitrovica. Ornamentation from medieval Serbian art, first prepared in projections on the computer, is then transferred to iconostases largely with the use of hand tools, thus creating harmonious and artistically successful wholes.





The arrival of new monks to the brotherhood created a need to restore some of the old monastery buildings, as well as to build new ones. Plans and work on the construction site are supervised by some monks who actively participate in work relating to the construction of new buildings.





The brotherhood of Visoki Dečani Monastery is aware of its special responsibility to preserve and enhance this holy shrine in this uncertain and difficult post-war period. The monks are also aware that, by the blessing of the Holy King, every segment of monastery life, monastic duties and all work has its own uniqueness and significance not limited to those who presently live there. The significance and beauty of the holy shrine, general conditions,

the activity of the monks and its addition to the UNESCO World Heritage List have helped the Monastery become famous throughout the world, and numerous senior international officials frequently visit it. Nevertheless, in the chronically unstable political and security situation, Visoki Dečani must remain under the strong protection of international peacekeeping forces until conditions are established for a normal life.





Дакле, богољубива уѣда,
 да ово видевши схватимо
 милосрђе **Б**ожје према
 нама. **П**отрудите се не
 само да се не разори или
 не одузме што од мога
 прилога и дара овоме
 храму, него шта више
 да надопуните оно што
 недостаје.

**СТЕФАН УРОШ КРАЉ
 СРБИЈЕ И ЦРНЕ ГОРЕ**



Therefore, God-loving children, upon hearing this let us comprehend the mercy of God toward us. Strive not only to protect my endowment and gifts to this holy place from destruction and loss but seek rather to add to them the things that are still missing...

Stefan Uroš the Third, by the Grace of God the King of All Serbian Lands and the Littoral
 (An extract from the Founding Charter of Visoki Dečani Monastery, 14th century)

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Serbian Orthodox monasteries

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| 1. Peška Patrijaršija (Patriarchate) | 7. Gračanica |
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Anonymous traveller, XV century:
Stefan, who is known as Dečanski, Uroš III, built this beautiful church of the Holy Ascension of the Lord on the Bistrica river in Dečani... His church, monumentally constructed in marble, overcomes every thought with its beauty, its various sculptures that would take a year to describe...



Italian Missionary
Fra Boneventura da Palazzuolo 1637:
Extraordinary monastery with a marvellous church, as most beautiful churches in Italy, built with multi-colored stone, with a cupola, many chappels, covered by lead, with carved marble, full of beautiful frescoes showing the life of Jesus Christ, Mary, Apostles, Patriarchs, Prophets and other Saints.

Russian scientist Alexander Fedorovich Gilferding 1859:
The most significant monument of past Serbian fame and piety... one of the most perfect creations of Byzantine sacral architecture... It has been in continuous danger for more than 450 years, and one cannot help but say, together with the Serbian people, that God himself has miraculously preserved it.



British traveller,
Mary Edith Durham, 1904:
It lies precariously on the bloody edge of things, and only the wonderful white marble church tells of its former glory... Dechani dates from the palmy days of the Serbian empire, and is its finest monument... The whole interior of the church is elaborately frescoed... Doors and windows are all elaborately and splendidly carved, and the whole is in such a wonderfully good state of preservation that it is small wonder that the people have deep faith in the protecting power of the Sveti Kralj (Holy King), and believe that in the whole world there is no building quite so beautiful.

Holy Bishop Nikolaj of Ochrid and Žiča, 1924:
Holy King Stefan is alive and powerful and forever present in his holy monastic community granting all faithful pilgrims the healing of soul and body. Glory be to Him, honor and mercy unto the ages!

